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## Rethinking the Roles of Fashion Designers

*The Case of Pre Helsinki*

Chun, Namkyu; Gurova, Olga; Niinimäki, Kirsi

*Published in:*  
The Design Journal

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944](https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944)

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*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Chun, N., Gurova, O., & Niinimäki, K. (2017). Rethinking the Roles of Fashion Designers: The Case of Pre Helsinki. *The Design Journal*, 20(sup1), 4477-4486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944>

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# The Design Journal

An International Journal for All Aspects of Design

ISSN: 1460-6925 (Print) 1756-3062 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdj20>

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To cite this article: Namkyu Chun, Olga Gurova & Kirsi Niinimäki (2017) Rethinking the Roles of Fashion Designers. The Case of Pre Helsinki, The Design Journal, 20:sup1, S4477-S4486, DOI: [10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944](https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352944>



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Published online: 06 Sep 2017.



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# Rethinking the Roles of Fashion Designers. The Case of Pre Helsinki

Namkyu Chun<sup>a\*</sup>, Olga Gurova<sup>b</sup>, Kirsi Niinimäki<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture

<sup>b</sup>University of Helsinki

\*Corresponding author e-mail: namkyu.chun@aalto.fi

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the diverse roles fashion designers play in the contemporary fashion industry. Taking Finland as a case, it particularly investigates how fashion designers are involved in regional identity formation. By conceptualizing the place-making ability of fashion designers, it adds a new perspective on the expanded roles of fashion designers recognized in design research. This is done through exploration of Pre Helsinki, a platform launched in 2013 seeking to internationalize Finnish fashion. This platform, created and operated mostly by fashion designers, serves as a vivid example of the different roles that designers can play. The study is based on qualitative methods, namely, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation. Five characteristics of Pre Helsinki and five fashion designers' corresponding roles were identified, based on thematic analysis of the data. This paper concludes with suggestions for further investigation on fashion designers to establish a dialogue between fashion and design research.

**Keywords:** Fashion Designers, Fashion Design, Place-Making, Case Study, Regional Identity

## 1. Introduction

Among the multiple roles of fashion designers in the contemporary fashion industry, a less conceptualized one has recently grown in significance – the role of designers in the formation of regional identities. In the context we scrutinize for this paper, Finnish fashion designers represent an excellent example of positioning Finland on a global cultural and fashion map. Recently, Finnish fashion design achievements have been particularly acknowledged. These achievements include awards in international fashion competitions (e.g., Hyères Festival and LVMH prize), employment in high-profile global fashion brands (e.g., Nina Ricci and Lanvin), growing participation in major international fashion events (e.g., Paris and New York Fashion Week) and developing of international events in Helsinki. By succeeding in such ways, Finnish fashion designers actively contribute to positioning Finland in the global fashion landscape more strongly (Pöppönen, 2016).

In this paper, this particular role of designers in the formation of regional identity is addressed as 'place-making'. This inquiry departed from the question "what do fashion designers produce that is

significant for the nation?" (Skov, 2011, p. 150). Skov posed the question while introducing the ways in which small European nations, such as Norway and Belgium, utilized fashion design or fashion designers to construct a new regional identity as a 'fashion nation'. In order to further investigate this matter, this paper introduces the case of Pre Helsinki, a platform that implements place-making of Helsinki/Finland and has fashion designers at its core.

In 2013, Pre Helsinki was launched to overcome major challenges faced by the Finnish fashion industry, including disconnection between the domestic and global fashion scenes and segregated design and business sides of local fashion activity (Colliander, 2015). In order to overcome these challenges, five founders, with design and business backgrounds, joined forces to create a platform that serves young Finnish fashion talents striving for internationalization. With the support of various stakeholders, Pre Helsinki has created a set of local events for international guests (journalists, buyers and recruiters). These events include showcases of fashion designers, design workshops and a public pop-up store. Additionally, it has organized programs for major international fashion events, such as Paris Fashion Week and Shanghai Fashion Week. Since its early days, the platform has grown dynamically and continuously. This was due to the multiple layers of actors involved, including organizers, fashion designers and external partners (e.g., Marimekko, Aalto University and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Although these actors have shifted almost every season, similarly to the changing nature of the fashion industry, consistent support for fashion designers is noticeable.

From initiation, through development, to the actual events, Pre Helsinki has actively involved fashion designers themselves. Together with the recent success in international fashion competitions, it has played a significant role in introducing the regional identity of Finland as a 'fashion nation' globally. This paper thus argues that the ways in which fashion designers are involved in Pre Helsinki influence building a new regional identity. From this perspective, new questions arise: What aspects of the platform contribute to the construction of regional identity and how exactly is this place-making ability performed by the designers? In order to answer these questions, we introduce a sociological perspective of place-making to design research with the purpose to rethink the role of fashion designers. Throughout the empirical analysis on the case of Pre Helsinki, this paper attempts to answer Skov's question with an up-to-date example. In doing so, this study makes contributions to research at two levels. Academically, it enriches the understanding of design research by adding the place-making perspective as a new significant role of fashion designers. It also contributes to social science research of design with detailed analysis of how the place-making ability of fashion designers is implemented. On the other hand, practically, it presents the community of Finnish fashion designers in expanded fields beyond the fashion industry. Altogether the results of this study can provide a new model of thinking for the expanded role of design and fashion designers. We start with the theoretical perspective of place-making introduced to design research.

## 2. Theoretical foundations: Introducing place-making

Recently, Manzini (2015) has noted that place-making is a way expert designers can contribute to their local context through collaborations with other actors. However, overall the place-making ability of designers has not been scrutinized systematically in design research. Among other domains that have explored this concept, social science is a relevant research stream by which to view the expanded role of fashion designers. Particularly, stemming from Skov's work (2011), understanding the social science perspective on the place-making ability of fashion design offers a relevant explanation to the Pre Helsinki case. In her article, Skov investigated diverse strategies of smaller European countries (e.g., Norway and Belgium) to stand out from the hierarchy of the global fashion industry. She argued that fashion designers have been losing the role of dressing the public to global

fashion retailers. However, according to Skov (2011), instead of conventional garment making, they have the ability of place-making that “fills a cosmopolitan form with local content through displays and events associated with a heightened sense of here-and-now” (Skov, 2011, p. 138). To be able to construct regional identity, international validation is required rather than domestic promotion (Skov, 2011). Accordingly, she emphasized the place-making ability of fashion designers in the contemporary fashion industry.

Rantisi (2011) also noted the importance of place-making ability that requires the development of dynamic local fashion activities. She stressed the interaction between diverse actors of the local fashion scene as the key for successful place-making. This bottom-up approach allows fashion designers to contribute to the reconstruction of regional identity. In contrast, the government-led approach of ‘place-marketing’ tends to use fashion design simply as a medium for promoting the national identity. She argued that this top-down approach can easily restrict the place-making ability of fashion design.

More recently, McRobbie (2015) introduced a case of Berlin-based fashion designers as another example of place-making ability. Similarly to Skov, she argued that fashion designers have been replaced by massive global fashion producers (e.g., Zara) and other technologies, such as social media and new production processes. However, in Berlin, where less commercial and more artistic preferences in terms of fashion tend to prevail, female fashion designers have demonstrated an example of ‘post-Fordist place-making’. In other words, throughout their independently developed and socially engaging local stores, those designers acted as activists to construct a new movement of supporting female employment and economic independence in a particular neighborhood in Berlin.

Following these studies, for this study of Pre Helsinki, we conceptualize place-making as the ability that drives from collective and collaborative efforts of diverse local actors in order to construct and represent regional identity through creation of artifacts and meanings. From the scale of a nation to a neighborhood, the previous studies suggested a new role for fashion designers in society with their place-making ability. However, what fashion designers actually do in order to construct a new regional identity, and how, remains distanced from studies on design.

Design research has explored various topics on design and designers, including knowledge, tools and roles. A significant number of studies have investigated the ways in which professional designers work and think, including several ‘landmark’ studies (e.g., Cross, 2006; Dorst, 2010; Kimbell, 2012; Lawson, 2005). These academic endeavors have influenced the expansion of the design field into unconventional domains, such as public, non-profit and medical sectors (Brown, 2009; Thackara, 2005). However, this paper does not intend to provide a detailed summary of such a vast body of work. Rather, it focuses on a research opportunity to apply the place-making ability of fashion designers to design research.

Despite some efforts, fashion designers are conspicuous in their absence in empirical studies in design research. In fact, only a few studies in design research can be identified as having a possible connection with fashion design (e.g., Adams, et al., 2011; Lawson, 2005; Tonkinwise, 2011). These studies noted diverse aspects of professional designers while considering fashion designers in their scope. However, they mostly highlighted the element of style and aesthetics in fashion design. These elements are surely valuable in the field of fashion design, but diverse aspects of fashion designers have not been properly explored yet in design research.

In order to both connect studies on place-making with fashion designers and explore their role as place-makers, this study applies two analysis steps. Firstly, Pre Helsinki is explored from the point of view of its salient characteristics that helps to understand how this organization acts to construct a

new regional identity of Helsinki/Finland. Secondly, diverse roles of the designers related to those characteristics are identified and further analyzed.

### 3. Research methods

In order to frame Skov's (2011) question as design research, the case of Pre Helsinki was analyzed through two qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and observations. The main unit of observation in this study was the ways in which the fashion designers in the platform were involved in place-making of Helsinki/Finland.

For the data gathering, following the purposive sampling approach (Flick, 2009), the interviewees were chosen according to their involvement in the organization and functioning of the platform. Nine interviews were conducted in 2015/2016 in Helsinki. The chosen interviewees are also internationally recognized experts, which allowed them to give opinions with expertise on the position of the platform and Finnish fashion on the global stage. The interviewees included the co-founders of Pre Helsinki, organizers who currently work for the platform (Brand/Production Director, PR/Marketing Director, among others) and experts from both the local fashion school and industry (educators, consultants and a prominent designer).

The interviews were planned and prepared to identify characteristics of the platform and roles of fashion designers. Prior to each interview, secondary resources, such as news media, websites and social media, were examined to understand the background of each interviewee and construct relevant questions. Additionally, certain topics were commonly discussed with all interviewees. These topics included personal opinions about the Finnish fashion scene, his/her relationship with the platform and its future scenarios. Diverse angles of opinions based on different expertise and involvement in the platform guided this study towards a holistic and objective view. The data from the interviews was transcribed for the analysis and analyzed with the use of ATLAS software.

In addition to interviews, ethnographic observations were made during the Pre Helsinki program in 2016 from May 20th to 28th. The entire program (e.g., pop-up store opening, Aalto University fashion show, designer presentations and a workshop) was followed by the authors and documented through field notes and photographs.

Lastly, mediated data was collected throughout the program in 2016. The data included texts and visual materials from Pre Helsinki 2016 official communication channels, such as brochures, the website ("Pre Helsinki", 2016) and social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram). News and fashion media articles as well as blog posts were also followed. However, these materials were only used as supportive information for this study.

Regarding the interpretation of the data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to review both transcribed interviews and field notes. In particular, a theoretical approach of thematic analysis was employed to compare the results from previous studies on place-making of fashion designers and the Pre Helsinki case. The use of this approach was relevant, as this study not only investigates a specific aspect of its fashion designers in the data but also codes to answer the research question of the paper. Following the two units of observation, firstly, characteristics of the platform were coded. Five characteristics were identified; subsequently, further analysis examined how fashion designers were involved in the platform in relation to these platform characteristics. Relevant themes from the data set were mapped continuously and refined during the process. In order to validate the analysis, authors of this study reviewed the data set independently and triangulated the findings through a series of discussions (Denzin, 1978).

## 4. Findings: How fashion designers place-make via Pre Helsinki

In what follows, first, we reconstruct the characteristics of Pre Helsinki as a platform, which allows us to understand its main functions. We will then describe the roles of the fashion designers in the context of the platform's particular characteristics. These roles explain how place-making is implemented in the platform.

### 4.1 Characteristics of Pre Helsinki

From the data analysis, five characteristics of Pre Helsinki were identified. These characteristics were cultivating a collaborative mindset among the designers, having a designer-centered approach, creating experiential fashion activities, developing a new category of fashion week and promoting Finnish fashion design globally. These characteristics are not isolated, but rather, they illustrate altogether the role of the platform in the regional identity construction.

The first characteristic is cultivation of a collaborative mindset among designers. The fashion designers participating in the platform communicated intensively to create various activities in collaboration. Satu Maaranen, co-founder of Pre Helsinki, described the relationship between organizers and designers: "We have said to our designers that 'let's be very open and when new things come then we always have to talk about it together'" (interview, February 2015). In fact, having organizers such as Maaranen who is a fashion designer but works also as Creative Director of the platform has helped significantly in establishing trust and a more horizontal relationship with the designers.

The second characteristic is having a designer-centered approach. Pre Helsinki was jointly founded by designers and has been operated by mostly designers. As Maaranen stated, "they [the designers] are at the center of everything. I think they are the most important part" (interview, February 2015). As an organization with multiple stakeholders, Pre Helsinki has provided access to essential resources, especially international media and networks, for young Finnish fashion designers to achieve internationalization.

The third characteristic is the creation of experiential fashion activities. Maaranen highlighted that, "Telling a story, that is what we want to do" (interview, February 2015). To offer engaging experiences to visitors, varied activities have been developed, such as a pop-up store, designers' presentations and workshops. This creation of activities under a coherent story or theme "helps making the experience somehow not just better but more exciting" (S. Maaranen, interview, February 2015). In other words, Pre Helsinki offers excitement through a storytelling approach, realized through experiential activities that have been planned by the platform's fashion designers themselves.

The fourth characteristic is the development of a new category of fashion week. From its origin, Pre Helsinki has aimed at innovating the fashion week model. Its location in Helsinki and usual schedule in May have provided opportunities for hosting influential guests. Regarding this aspect, Kirsti Lindberg-Repo, branding expert and Professor at Aalto University School of Business, noted, "They created a new category with the thinking of how to invite journalists and people here to see the fashion. [...] They created a new world around fashion Helsinki in May" (interview, June 2015). Moreover, the ways in which the designers work for its program differs, as they collaborate more to present a coherent theme. In contrast, conventional fashion weeks tend to simply curate a series of events that are operated by independent designers and brands, and the theme of each collection is thus individually very different. Instead of simply curating independent works of different designers,

Pre Helsinki has designed a series of actual contents that allow visitors to fully experience the work of designers. Visitors can interact with designers and engage with their work on a personal level.



Figure 1. An experiential setting from the presentation of designers in Pre Helsinki 2016

The last characteristic is the global promotion of Finnish fashion design. Regarding this aspect, the organizers chose designers that (to them) represent what Finnish fashion design means—a highly artistic approach and knowledge of materials. As Mia Koski, co-founder and former Production Director of Pre Helsinki, stated, "there is a definitely high artistic level in the design and very good knowledge about materials [...]" (interview, March 2015). Pre Helsinki then presents the most relevant Finnish fashion designers to the global media representatives and international markets through the various events organized.

These characteristics both summarize how Pre Helsinki works and illuminate how place-making is implemented through this platform. However, each characteristic constructs a separate 'stage' on which its fashion designers can play different roles. Five corresponding roles of the designers arose from the five characteristics and will be described in the following section.

## 4.2 Diverse Roles of Fashion Designers in Pre Helsinki

By further analyzing the five characteristics of Pre Helsinki, the study then identified the roles of the fashion designers, to conceptualize the ways in which they actually contribute to the place-making of Helsinki/Finland. Depending on the nature of the designers' involvement in the platform, the roles were grouped into three locations of action: aimed inside the platform, aimed outside of it and combining both inside and outside orientation. The five roles that arose from the five characteristics are community members, active agents, storytellers, innovators and identity builders. Table 1 provides descriptions of the roles.

Table 1. Roles of fashion designers in Pre Helsinki



Location of Action	Characteristic	Role	Description
Inside	Cultivating a Collaborative Mindset	Community Members	By communicating openly and sharing resources to achieve their goal, designers have become active members within the community of Pre Helsinki. It has been possible through the connections between designers and organizers of the platform from their educational or professional background.
Inside and Outside	Designer-Centered Approach	Active Agents	Internally, diverse needs of designers have been considered significantly during the planning phase. New programs have been developed to fulfill the needs. Throughout different events of Pre Helsinki, the works of designers have been presented as unique competencies of the platform.
	Creating Experiential Fashion Activities	Storytellers	For each program, designers have created a new theme to construct their conceptual world. They have utilized in-depth material knowledge and artistic work to offer more exciting experiences for the visitors.
Outside	New Category of Fashion Week	Innovators	Designers have developed actual contents for the platform, such as pop-up stores and presentations, for them to personally interact with the visitors. They have revisited the conventional mode of fashion weeks to differently position the platform in time and space.
	Promoting Finnish Fashion Design	Identity Builders	Throughout the recent recognition from the international fashion scene, young Finnish fashion designers have been associated with particular aesthetics, including artistic approaches and material knowledge. In order to both reinforce the reputation and introduce new aspects continuously, designers of Pre Helsinki have been selected carefully.

The roles suggested above were not played separately, but are interconnected and influenced by each other. For instance, the role of designers as community members is enforced by their role as active agents. Additionally, as storytellers for the experiential fashion activities and a new category of fashion week, the designers were able to act as identity builders to enhance the value of Finnish fashion design during the events. This interplay of multiple roles of fashion designers certainly demonstrates the significant contribution of fashion designers to the place-making of Helsinki/Finland.

## 5. Conclusions

Drawing from the question by Skov (2011) that pointed out the symbolic productions of fashion designers for the nation, this study aimed at rethinking the roles of fashion designers in the case of Pre Helsinki. By conceptualizing the place-making ability of fashion designers, this paper contributes both conceptually and empirically to design research and to social science research. Two qualitative research methods were employed to view the involvements of fashion designers in the platform and their role of place-makers. As a result, firstly, its five characteristics that unfold the construction of a new regional identity of Helsinki/Finland were identified. These characteristics include cultivating a collaborative mindset among the designers, having a designer-centered approach, creating experiential fashion activities, developing a new category of fashion week and promoting Finnish fashion design globally. Accordingly, five roles, community members, active agents, storytellers, innovators and identity builders, arose from the five characteristics. Figure 2 illustrates the overview results of this study on Pre Helsinki.

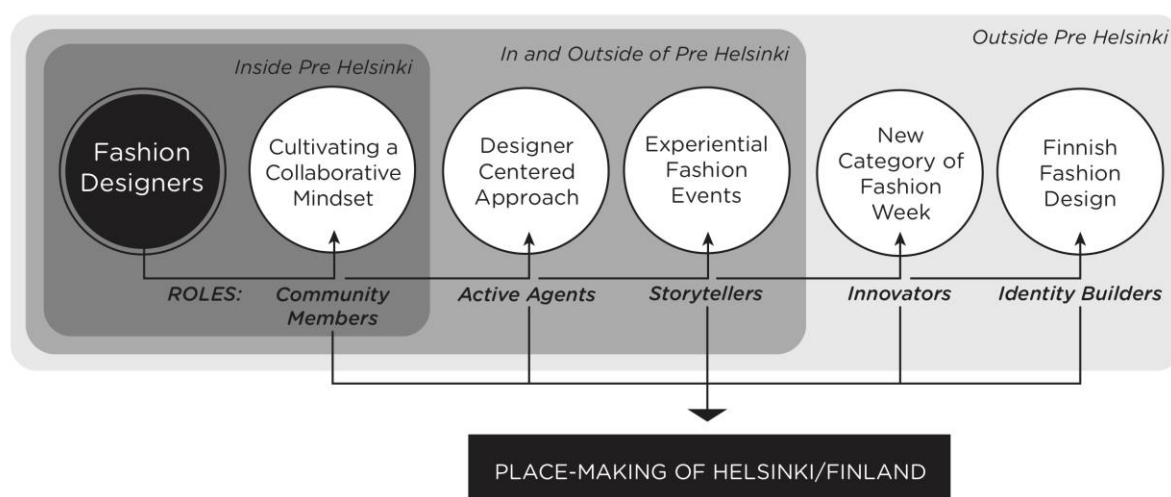


Figure 2. Multiple roles of fashion designers from three stages of Pre Helsinki

Overall, the Pre Helsinki case demonstrated the ways in which place-making was implemented through active involvement of Finnish fashion designers. Internally within the organization, the designers have been building a sense of community. The collaborative mindset among actors allowed the platform to be able to centralize its resources and efforts for supporting internationalization of young fashion designers. By co-authoring a new story for its program, the designers have offered experiential and experimental fashion events, and this contributed to the platform to stand out among various fashion weeks in the international fashion landscape. Moreover, by continuing to promote selected examples of Finnish fashion talent, the designers have contributed to sustaining the reputation of Finnish fashion design in the rapidly changing global fashion industry. What is remarkable is that these involvements of fashion designers were initiated and operated by mostly designers. Although the platform has received varied external support, it was established and managed by the designers. These involvements of fashion designers in Pre Helsinki expand beyond the conventional role of making garments. In relation to the place-making ability, we can clearly draw connections between these expanded roles of the designers in Pre Helsinki and the cases from previous studies by Skov (2011) and McRobbie (2015). Their bottom-up approaches are also what Rantisi (2011) noted as a key element to achieve place-making of a region, rather than place-marketing.

## 6. Future research

The last point proposes a direction for further studies in order to understand the expanded role of fashion designers. As mentioned earlier, the impact of accumulative studies in design research has been observable from both academia and industry. It has contributed to establishing the academic discourse and expanding boundaries of designers (e.g., Brown, 2009; Cross, 2006; Kimbell, 2012; Lawson, 2005; Manzini, 2015; Thackara, 2005;). Although the presence of fashion designers has been lacking in design research, recently from the domain of fashion research, Ræbild (2016) identified various design methods with in-depth studies of Danish fashion designers. Her study illustrated how the careful translation of design research can be implemented in fashion research.

To build on Ræbild's efforts, but also to overcome mere adaptation of the results from design research into fashion research, deeper investigation on the ways in which fashion designers work and think must be undertaken. Thus, it is sound to continue further studies on the work of fashion designers that can nurture fashion research and enable fashion designers to be involved in broader contexts, rather than the conventional domain of the fashion industry. As an expansion of Ræbild's study on Danish fashion designers (2016), a study on fashion designers in Finland can be added to explore characteristics of fashion design. Moreover, beyond Pre Helsinki, investigating the Finnish fashion scene further can also project alternative approaches to the global industry due to its strong tradition in applied arts (Hohti 2011; Korvenmaa 2010) and recent development in both local and global contexts. Adding these perspectives of fashion design can foster a dynamic interplay between design thinking and fashion thinking. This will invite designers to rethink future roles that take them out of their bubble.

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About the Authors:

**Namkyu Chun** (MFA, Transdisciplinary Design) is a doctoral researcher at Aalto University. By investigating the notion of fashion thinking, his research aims at establishing a dialogue between fashion and design research in order to introduce expanded roles of fashion designers beyond dressing the public.

**Olga Gurova** (PhD, Cultural Studies) is an assistant professor in consumption studies at Aalborg University in Denmark. She previously worked as Academy of Finland research fellow at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research interests include consumption studies and fashion studies.

**Kirsi Niinimäki** (DA, Design) is an Associate Professor in Fashion Research at Aalto University. Her own research focuses on holistic understanding of sustainable fashion and textile fields. Niinimäki runs the Fashion/Textile Futures research group <http://ftfutures.aalto.fi>.

**Acknowledgements:** We gratefully acknowledge the support of Julia Valle-Noronha and Carlos Peralta in reviewing this paper.